

THE POVERTY & DEPRIVATION TASK AND FINISH GROUP (OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Interim Report July 2021

“I believe we are a caring Council but ‘reducing poverty’ is not a stated priority in the Council’s 5 year plan and therefore resources and reporting aren’t necessarily curated and presented to demonstrate what the Council does to address this issue”

A senior Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Officer, March 2021

Executive Summary

At the Full Council Meeting in February 2020, a motion was introduced which the Council resolved to be referred to Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC).

The Motion:

That this Council, as part of its consideration of how it can play a greater role in addressing rising levels of poverty in Tunbridge Wells, undertakes a needs analysis and public engagement exercise to fully understand the extent of poverty in the top ten most deprived local areas in the Borough concentrated in Sherwood, Broadwater, High Brooms, Rusthall, Paddock Wood and Cranbrook (as identified in the 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation[IMD]). This exercise and subsequent work will help to inform how the Council and its partners can lift more residents out of poverty and identify additional measures that will be undertaken to improve the life chances of over 1 in 5 children currently growing up in poverty in the Borough.

These 10 locations are represented by 23 Borough Councillors – very nearly half of the Borough’s Councillors represent communities where more than 20% of its children are living in poverty.

OSC set up a Task & Finish Group to examine the issues raised in the motion. The Task & Finish Group comprises Chris Woodward (then OSC Chair), Dave Funnell, Patrick Thomson, Christian Atwood and Hugo Pound (Chair). We have been supported at every meeting by Mark O’Callaghan (Scrutiny & Engagement Officer) and Jane Clarke (Head of Policy & Governance).

Continued

The scope of the Working Group:

[1] To identify actions and measures by the Council and also take into account what other organisations and agencies are doing to address the IMD;

[2] To understand the Council's role in coordination.

[3] To develop recommendations around a qualitative public consultation to determine if there are further roles that the Council can undertake

Officers have undertaken desk research on the current national initiatives relating to the alleviation of deprivation and a current regional/borough perspective.

At one of its first meetings, the group agreed that it should limit its investigation to three principal contributors to deprivation within the context of Tunbridge Wells – these are **income, education & training** and **access to housing and services**. This is not to deny the importance of other elements of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) but it has provided the group with a focus that each of our invited guests has concurred with – that income (either from the state or from employment), education & training (to increase the likelihood of good quality, secure employment) and access to housing and services (recognising the unusually high housing costs which burden many families and the signposting available to help residents find the right support) are the key constituents that are likely to have the greatest impact on deprivation in our lowest Lower-layer Super Output areas (LSOAs).

We have also invited and been very grateful for the views and input from Sheila Coburn (Head of Revenues and Benefits), Jane Lang (Housing Services Manager), Liz de Villiers (Chief Executive, Tunbridge Wells and District Citizen Advice), Zena Cooke (Corporate Director Finance, KCC), Jackie Sumner (Town and Country Housing), Carol Mackonochie (then Portfolio Holder for Communities and Wellbeing) and Paul Taylor (Director of Change and Communities).

In relation to [1] above, the group has been impressed by the rapidly-improving co-ordination, information-sharing and responsiveness of all the agencies we have spoken to. Covid has undeniably propelled agencies to work more effectively together and there are already nascent developments to better anticipate individuals and families at risk of sliding into poverty and associated deprivation. Being proactive in offering help and support rather

than reactive to crises provides the potential for greater stability for families and, in the longer-term, less likelihood of multi-disciplinary interventions.

In relation to [2] above, it is felt that there is more that the Council can do to provide an initiation and co-ordination role through its own departments and in partnership with other agencies. There is some evidence that the Council's engagement and proactivity with external agencies is sometimes more effectively progressed than inter-departmentally with the Borough Council. This is a matter the Working Group would like to explore further and report back to OSC at a later date, towards the end of 2021.

In relation to [3] above, the Working Group believes that a truly effective qualitative engagement with the public about their expectations of and needs from the Council should be linked to the yet to emerge engagement strategy. The last residents' survey was undertaken in 2015 and no qualitative data currently exists to represent the expectations and need from any of the diverse groups affected by poverty and deprivation in the Borough. This element of the Working Group's remit can not be addressed by its members alone.

Interim Recommendations

1. That a senior officer be designated to co-ordinate the Council's responses across all departments for those functions whose actions have an impact on income, education & training and access to housing and services.
2. That the Cabinet determine and publicise metrics relating to these three elements of IMD with clear accountabilities to officers for their delivery.
3. That the Council initiates community-based surveys, group discussions and public displays in each of the six wards listed in the original motion to ascertain our residents' expectations and needs and their ability to access services currently.
4. That the Working Group continues to meet and gather evidence which will lead to a discrete number of multi-agency Community Action Plans, co-ordinated and facilitated by TWBC in 2022.